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U. S. Department of Agriculture

THE FARM LABOR PROBLEM

by

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(Address given at the National Conference of Rural Projects
Division of FSA at New Orleans--February 3, 1941)

As a nation we are engaged today in a tremendous effort of national defense whose goal is to stem the tide of reaction and of obscurantism let loose upon the world by aggressive totalitarianism. This great national effort calls not only for our re-dedication to the principles of democracy, the spiritual basis of our society, but more than ever before to the everyday practice of its precepts. Never before has the practical recognition of the rights of the common man been of as paramount importance as it is today, and more than ever before, is it essential that this be given more than a formal, a mere lip service recognition in our work.

Mr. Hudgins, speaking before the Conference of National Representatives and Regional Personnel state directors and District Supervisors of Region I (September 24, 1940), formulated very well what he called "two obvious facts" of the present period:

His first point was that "Democracy will survive only by providing the means of releasing people from shackles, and of giving them security. This is not in competition with defense measures, for we must provide ourselves with armies, tanks, and airplanes against the time when it may be necessary to disarm those who seek to destroy democracy, but we must not let ourselves think that democracy will be saved that way. Our survival as a democracy will depend on the extent to which we make our people free, and give them internal security."

His second point was that our economic system "the so-called capitalistic system will survive only if it is willing to assume creative responsibility for its own casualties, and help those casualties recapture a measure of dependable security. Political democracy must rest on a foundation of economic democracy, or there will be little stability in it."

"These two points," Mr. Hudgens went on to say, "are of major significance to us in the Farm Security, for there is no better definition of our mission and our responsibility than that we are helping to make democracy work by freeing people from the bondage of a disgraceful standard of living, and building into those lives greater security; and that we are introducing tools for helping the capitalistic system work where it hasn't worked before."

As an agency of the government, the FSA has been concerned with what is generally recognized to be the most disadvantaged group in our society, with those segments of our rural population who, through no fault of their own, have been denied that economic security and well-being that they have a right to demand and to expect of a democratic society. The FSA has been in the front-line trenches of this battle of extending security to the disadvantaged groups in agriculture from the very beginning of its existence and the policies of our administration, both general and specific, were shaped in accordance with that end.

Perhaps one of the most significant activities of the FSA has been the attempt to alleviate the distress of that most neglected section of our agricultural population--the agricultural wage labor, particularly the migratory workers, and those displaced farmers who have joined their ranks.

I say "one of the most significant programs" because the development of the migratory camp program has been an important "land-mark" in the relation of our government to agriculture in general. Aside from the Sugar Act of 1934, which included protective provisions for sugar beet workers, the migratory camp program was the first concrete evidence of the recognition of government's responsibility toward a segment of our rural population which heretofore was left out in all plans for aid to agriculture.

The idea that relief of agricultural distress should include not only farm operators but also farm wage labor is now receiving recognition in ever-widening circles of the public as well as the government and will soon be regarded not as a revolutionary innovation, but as a matter of common sense and public decency.

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Recently a great deal of attention has been directed to the problem of migration of farm persons in the U. S. in general, and to migratory agricultural labor in particular. We in the FSA have recognized this problem several years back and have tried to do something about it--even in the face of blind, short-sighted, and sometimes arrogant opposition. Today our efforts are bearing fruit: the country is recognizing that the economic insecurity and bad living conditions among our farm workers is one of the most pressing concerns of our agriculture. To recognize a problem is in itself half of its solution.

In dealing with the farm labor problem it is essential first to consider briefly the general situation in agriculture; more specifically, some of the basic factors that are profoundly affecting

and changing the whole character of our agricultural economy. I believe that without an appreciation of these fundamental factors of our agricultural economy, we cannot have a correct, sensible perspective of the farm labor problem. Secondly, it is necessary to divest ourselves of the idea that the migratory labor problem is synonymous with the whole farm labor problem. The truth, of course, is that the migratory labor problem is only a part of the larger problem of farm labor even if it happens to be, from a certain standpoint, especially from the standpoint of our camp program, of greatest importance at the present time.

We are accustomed to think of the United States as essentially an industrial country. Yet as recently as the Spanish American War the value of our agricultural production ran neck and neck with the value of our industrial production. Even at the beginning of this century the value of agricultural production still stood at 66% of the value of manufacturing and mining production. But by 1925 it dropped to 25%. Today the relative position of agriculture to the total economy is lower in the U. S. than in any other major industrial country. These changes are reflected in figures on population gainfully employed; the proportion of those gainfully employed in agriculture declined from 32.5% in 1910, to 25.6% in 1920, and to 21.5% in 1930.

The fact that agriculture as a whole is in a sick condition, and that it has been ill for a long time, long before the economic collapse of 1929, is no secret and is well known to you. Our agricultural history is somewhat older than our industrial history, but not very

much older, and it has been subject to chronic ills somewhat longer than industry. The astounding fact to me is the manner in which we as a nation have dissipated our almost unlimited agricultural resources in so short a time. When we started out as an independent nation 150 years ago we inherited a whole continent with the world's richest agricultural resources. Within a period of 150 years all but 12.4% of a total of the original 1,442,220,000 acres of "public domain", i. e., land owned by the Federal Government, were transferred to private ownership by the Federal Government. It was upon this foundation that a class of independent farmers, the very backbone of American democracy, arose. Today, significantly enough, from a nation of an almost unlimited supply of free virgin land, to be had for the asking, we have become a nation where over 40% of farmers have no land of their own; and where "land hunger" which, only yesterday, we thought was peculiar to the countries of the old world, stalks the land.

Back of this phenomenal and unsound transformation lie two major factors; one is historical--it has already more or less spent itself; the other is current and is still active. Thus, the historic policies, the various homestead acts, which have promoted the emergence of independent farmers gave rise also to large-scale speculation in land, to glaring abuses of land laws on the part of railroads, mortgage companies and banks, which particularly characterized the second half of the last century and which already have undermined the position of the small--the independent farmers. The second factor lies in the profound changes in agriculture in the United States which have occurred since the turn of the last century, particularly since the last war.

These changes were in the direction of increasing industrialization and the development of large-scale commercial farming which has gradually come to occupy a more or less dominant position in our agricultural economy. This development had started even before the first world war. Its social-economic effect was arrested temporarily during the last world war by world war prosperity only to emerge in a more intense form in the post-war period.

Chronic agricultural depression of the post-war period, accompanied by the widening disparity between agricultural and industrial prices, and the contraction of foreign markets due to policies of national self-sufficiency abroad, and our own high protective tariff policies, has greatly intensified competition among farmers in the domestic market and has stimulated rapid mechanization and concentration of agricultural production on relatively few farms.

Already in the late 20's production of commercial crops in the United States was concentrated on 15 to 20 per cent of all farms. In 1929, which was a relatively prosperous year for agriculture, one-fifth of all farms accounted for three-fifths of the products sold or traded. These were farms which managed to adapt themselves to declining prices in the post-war period. Significantly, the number of tractors on farms increased from 246,083 in 1920 to 920,000 in 1930, and these were concentrated on 13% of all farms in the United States. For the same period agricultural equipment measured in terms of mechanical power, almost doubled. It is among these 13% of farms that we find farms that were able, by the application of machine methods to production, to raise labor productivity to higher levels and thereby to operate at a profit amidst general failures. The position of the

majority of farmers with regard to the commercial market was already greatly weakened toward the end of the 20's. The small farmer was losing rapidly his share of the commercial market.

The depression of 1929-1933 brought almost an unprecedented impoverishment of farmers. Hundreds of thousands were forced off the land. The depression has accelerated the process of changing the small farm producer into a wage earner or part-time wage earner.

The force of these processes has not yet spent itself. The partial recovery of agriculture from the 1929-1933 depression has been accompanied by the further extension of agricultural mechanization, and there has been a further displacement of farmers, which has added large numbers to an already large surplus of farm wage workers.

Our farm economy is made up of millions of individual units representing, from a broad social-economic standpoint, two dissimilar types. Some farms operate like factories, are highly capitalized, depend upon hired labor and are often corporate in form. Others, the overwhelming majority, are operated by small owners or by small tenants who depend largely, if not entirely, on their own labor and the labor of their families. The farm labor problem is obviously related directly to the first category of farms and touches the second type for the most part only indirectly, but with serious results.

What happens to the second type of farms is of fundamental importance to farm wage labor. For the situation in agriculture today may be likened to the conditions that have existed in the early stages of the factory system. For some time the factory system coexisted with the earlier system of production, the so-called handicraft system, but as it gained momentum, its superior methods of production began to

displace, to force out small independent producers, turning them into wage-earners who had to hire out, to become factory hands, in order to live. The transformation of the independent handicraft producers into wage earners created an additional supply of factory wage workers whose availability in the labor market exercised a constant pressure on wages and on the standard of living of those already employed.

A similar process is now taking place in agriculture. In fact it has been going on for some time. The extension of large-scale industrial farming threatens the existence of the small, the independent, the working farmer, and is one of the principal factors of "farm displacement", although not the only one. Like the displaced "handicraftsman", the displaced farmer, in order to exist, must seek wage-employment; he becomes, sooner or later, a wage worker, and competes for jobs with other wage earners, either on the farm or in the factory.

One peculiarity of the working farm economy or the family size farm is that it has several working members, in addition to the operator, who are members of the family and who do not work for wages on such farm—the so-called "unpaid family workers." It is the availability of such unpaid family workers on the farms that has helped, has made possible, the survival of the small farmer in competition with the more well capitalized and more efficiently operated large scale farm, but, as a rule, at the expense of a continuously declining standard of living. When such a farm is foreclosed, tractorized out, or droughted out, not one, but usually several workers are thrown on the labor market.

The impact of the two trends--the trend to reduce the demand for agricultural labor due to the operation of such factors as technological displacement of labor, the contraction of the farm market, and concentration of production on fewer farms, on the one hand--and the displacement of farmers, which adds to the supply of persons seeking employment as wage earners, on the other hand--has created a social-economic problem in agriculture that in its magnitude overshadows any other of our rural maladjustments.

It has been estimated by Dr. Paul Taylor that between one and two million men, women and children have come to constitute a perpetual migratory group of casual workers. In addition the roads of our country are crowded with tens of thousands of uprooted families who only recently had a position on the land they thought secure, but now, like the Joads of Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath", seek jobs as wage workers on the industrialized farms of the Far West or elsewhere.

It is no wonder that the line of demarcation between agricultural wage-earners proper and many groups of "farm operators" is becoming more and more attenuated. And, while traditionally the social and economic status of farmers has always been in a state of flux, the general movement during the last two or three decades has been downward, from independent status, to tenancy, share-cropping and wage-labor. The traditional pattern of the agricultural ladder is no longer true. The agricultural ladder in fact is working in reverse, The further spread of large-scale agricultural industrialization will tend to deepen economic inequality in agriculture, with one section, a relatively small one, rising to higher economic levels, while another, a relatively larger one, sinking to a lower level. It is

this fact that lies behind much of the agricultural labor problem and that makes the farm problem and the farm wage labor problem intimately related problems.

In 1930 close to 3,000,000 persons or 26% of the total population gainfully employed in agriculture, were listed as farm wage workers. But in addition, there were two other groups in the farm population which stood in close economic and social relationship to farm wage earners proper. First, there were many farmers who, although classified as farm operators, were actually only part-time farmers--those who, because of inadequate income from farming, have to seek outside employment. Of the 6,230,000 farm operators listed in the 1930 Census, 37% reported outside employment, about 14% of these in agricultural employment. These figures are for the country as a whole. In some sections of the country, the percentage of farmers working outside was much greater. In 1935 for some states it was as high as 60%. Secondly, there were many farmers whose status as "farm operators" is entirely gratuitous, who are actually farm laborers distinguishable from farm wage earners only by being paid in kind instead of in money wages. In this category, for example, are the 750,000 share-croppers listed in the 1935 Census whose position is now being seriously threatened by mechanization, and other factors--a position which would become catastrophic in the event a practicable cotton picking machine or new ginning methods find widespread commercial application.

When dealing with the question of industrialization of agriculture we should guard against sweeping generalizations which do more to obscure than to clarify our understanding. On the one hand

there are those who because they are against large-scale commercialized agriculture tend to deny or to minimize the importance of industrialization and, consequently, to ignore its companion phenomenon--the problem of farm displacement and of wage labor. Singularly enough, it is among those who vociferously deny that there is a trend toward industrialization in agriculture that we find persons who are most energetic in promoting policies and interests of large scale industrialized farming. On the other hand there are those who are so impressed by the marked advances made by industrialized agriculture that they are prone to accept too readily as an accomplished fact what in reality is as yet only a strong tendency and who consequently fail to take sufficiently into account that the area of non-commercial farming is still naturally large, and that it may yet be possible to adopt social policies that would bring to these farmers the benefits associated with industrialization without destroying their farmer status.

The fact is that with some notable exceptions, the development of industrialization in agriculture is still only in its early stages, in the sense that the inroads of machine technology develop in agriculture relatively slowly and that complete mechanization of agricultural production has not been brought about as yet even on the so-called "large-scale" farms. Its developments, moreover, in terms of type of farming and by geographic divisions has been extremely uneven, spotty. Nevertheless, the increasing penetration of industrialism in agriculture is of great significance since it presages, unless differently channelized, further profound social-economic dislocations. Today the kind of agricultural pattern found in California is a prototype of what appears to be a widespread trend in other regions.

Notwithstanding the dominant position of commercial farming in agriculture, mentioned earlier, farm production today continues to be carried on by millions of small, scattered and, on the whole, non-commercial farms which employ few if any workers. The rate of concentration of employment is consequently much lower than in industry. For example, in 1930, there were 2,631,600 farms, or nearly 42% of the total, which reported expenditure on hired labor. These farmers employed a total of 2,700,000 workers, or about one wage-worker per farm. In contrast, for the same year, a total of 210,000 manufacturing establishments employed an aggregate of 8,800,000 workers, or close to 42 workers per establishment; in other words, the rate of concentration of employment in industry was about 42 times as high as in agriculture.

A closer analysis of employment data in agriculture reveals, however, that although the vast majority of farms that use hired labor are small employers employing from 1 to 3 or 4 workers, a rather large percentage of hired workers are employed on a relatively few large scale commercial farms. Employment on these farms resembles the employment pattern of industrial enterprises more than the traditional farm pattern. Thus, in 1930 one-tenth of one per cent of all farms in the country spent 11% of the \$900,000,000 paid out in wages that year by all farms. In truck farming nine-tenths of one per cent of such farms accounted for 29.0% of all wages paid out by all truck farms; in fruit less than one and one-half per cent of farms paid out more than 25.2% of wages; etc. In some states, concentration of farm labor on large scale farms was much greater. In California, for

example, which is recognized to be the state of the most industrialized agriculture in the United States, 7% of truck farms accounted for 53.4% of the total labor expenditure in truck farming; 4.5% of cotton farms accounted for 40.5% of the total labor expenditure of cotton farms in 1929, and so on.

The movement of agricultural wage-earners from one crop to another or from one crop area to another has always produced what has been the largest single element in the nation's migration picture. It is not a new phenomenon of agricultural America. What is new is its recent magnitude.

To avoid confusion, I wish to call your attention to two different types of migratory movements originating within agriculture: (1) the movement of population from the farm to the city, from rural to urban centers; and (2) the movement of agricultural wage earners from one crop to another, from one area to another, either within the same state or across state lines. The first type of migration has its roots in the dynamics of birth rate, the ups and downs of national economy in general and of agricultural economy in particular. The second, on the other hand, has its roots wholly in the production cycles of agricultural economy itself, it is recurrent and in a sense a necessary movement and is therefore of a permanent nature. In certain areas of the country agriculture depends entirely upon migratory workers and could not operate without this class of labor. These are the areas of highly developed commercialized, industrialized farming.

But within the migratory labor movement in agriculture it is important to differentiate between three distinct, yet related problems. (1) Migration resulting from population shifts due to worn out land floods; to droughts or other major natural cataclysms; (2) migrations which are brought about by displacement of farmers and (3) migrations arising out of the seasonal peculiarities of agricultural production noted already. Drought induced migration or migration resulting from depletion of land resources is a transitory movement and is destined to disappear. At any rate, although it has and may still create serious problems for us, its solution will depend upon long range planning of the conservation of soil resources, and planned re-distribution of population affected. The last two types of migration are more fundamental--the third, viz., migration arising out of the seasonal and production peculiarities in the sense that it is integrally bound up with the whole system of agricultural operation, the second, that of displacement because it appears destined to be continuous, extending over a long period of time, depending upon the rate of industrialization of agriculture and upon the efforts of the government (of FSA) to either cushion it, arrest it entirely, or give it a different direction.

Hired farm laborers, whether seasonal, migratory or resident, are widely distributed throughout the area east of the Rocky Mountains. Heavy concentrations appear also in the Rio Grande, Corpus Christi, and the Black Prairie districts of Texas, in the sugar cane districts of Louisiana, in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta cotton areas; in the Michigan berry and small fruit area, in the beet area of that state, and in the scattered fruit and truck crop areas in Florida and along the Atlantic Coast. West

of the Rocky Mountains, concentrations appear in the Salt River districts of Arizona, the Imperial Valley, California, and along the Pacific Coast.

Taking our large geographic divisions, the North, the South and the West we find, according to the 1930 Census, that of the close to 3,000,000 farm wage earners in the country, 41.8% were concentrated in the North, 43.2% in the South, and 15% in the West. The 15% for the West is significant when we consider that the West had in 1930, only 8% of all the farms in the country, as compared to 40.7% for the North and 51.3% for the South, and that of the total farm population in U. S. in 1930, of 30.44 million, only 2.28 million were in the West, as compared to 11.83 in the North and 16.31 million in the South. Equally interesting is data on the distribution of population gainfully employed in agriculture by major geographic divisions. Of the total population gainfully employed in agriculture 42.6% or more than 4 in every 10 were wage earners in the West, as compared to 28.9% or 3 in 10 for the North and 21.2% or 2 in 10 for the South.

In 1930, 41% of all farms in the United States reported using hired labor and the total wage bill paid for wage labor amounted to over \$900,000,000. In the West, 58.7% of all farms reported the use of hired labor; in the North 52%, and in the South 31%. With only 8% of the nation's farms the West's share of the total farm wage bill was 27.6%. With 41% of the nation's farms, the North's share of the total wage bill was 47.7%; while the South, with 51% of the nation's farms accounted for only 25% of the total wage bill.

The prevalence of large scale commercial farms in the West is the principal reason for the wide use made of hired labor and for the relatively large sums spent on hired labor. Of a total of 7,875 large scale farms in the United States, in 1930, each producing \$30,000 worth of produce or more, the West accounted for 4,462, the North for 1,641, and the

South for 1,772. One other interesting point about these large scale farms: of the 7,875 farms in this class, 763 were in the up to 100 acres size group; 875 in the from 100 to 200 acres size group; 1,767 in the from 200 to 500 acres size group; 1,083 in the from 500 to 1000 size group; and 3,875 in the 1000 acres and over size group. This shows of course that large-scale farms don't have to be large in size; that many farms with small acreage may be large-scale farms from the standpoint of capitalization and the volume of production, -- the most significant indices of size in agriculture.

Mechanization of agriculture through the application of tractor power and the development of large power-drawn implements and of specialized machinery has been, and continues to be perhaps, the most important single source of increased productivity which has tended to reduce labor requirements for the principal crops of the country thereby reducing also the opportunity for agricultural employment. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the general trend.

In the production of corn, labor requirements per bushel has been reduced on an average of 20% between 1909-13 and 1930-36, primarily because of the use of tractors and of large equipment. Within the last 30 years labor requirements per acre of cotton production decreased 39% in Texas and Oklahoma, and from 5% to 6% in the Delta cotton area. Labor requirements for wheat production per acre declined by 50%, with an estimated reduction of over 240 million man-hours in the annual use of labor for wheat production. Since the last war, the decline of labor requirements in the production of potatoes has amounted to about 15%; as a result of

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The recent attention given to migratory problems, especially the attention focused upon this problem by Mr. Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath", and Mr. Cary McWilliam's "Factories in the Field", has tended to obscure the important fact that not all farm wage earners are migratory workers and that even within the migratory workers there are important distinctions. The number of non-migratory workers is probably as large if not larger than that of the migratory workers. Among these there are several major classes: (1) the year-round "hired man" resident on the farm; (2) the regular-seasonal employed farm hand who lives either on the farm or in the country but off the farm; (3) the seasonally employed farm hand, who is a local town resident; (4) the seasonally employed farm hand, not locally resident but not a constant "migratory". Then there are the "southern wage hands", the contract laborers of the sugar beet areas and the "share-croppers of the South".

It is important to emphasize the fact that there are other than migratory wage workers in agriculture, because the social-economic problems that these workers face are just as serious, just as bad, just as acute and just as challenging as those of the migratory workers. If this is not more generally known it is because there is more ignorance, more lack of information about these workers than about any other group of similar

magnitude in our agriculture. Their condition has been summarized as follows:

"The birth rate among farm laborer groups is the highest of any major occupational class in the Nation. In comparison to other farm groups the farm laborer household contains a relatively large number of children under 10 years of age and of young parents from 20 to 25 years of age. The size and composition of the farm worker's household are such that the economic and social responsibility is heavier than that of any other class of parents in America. They have more dependents to support than any occupational group in the Nation and they must do this on an average income that is lower than that of any comparable group The problem of child welfare among the laborers becomes a problem of national magnitude The incomes of farm laborers are far below what is needed for a decent standard of living of the million and a half houses occupied by sharecroppers and farm laborers the great majority are below standards of health and decency wage hands and croppers are not only poorly fed and clothed but also are often illiterate and in poor health. The educational status of farm laborers and their children is considerably lower than that of other farm people."

"If in 1937 farm workers had been able to secure full time employment at the rates reported by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics . . . annual per worker earnings at monthly rates without board . . . would have varied from \$278 in the East South Central regions to \$791 in the Pacific region. At day rates without board, per worker earnings would have ranged from \$210 in the East South Central region to \$584 in New England.

"Comparable data relating to croppers and wage hands in Southern States indicate that in recent years net cash earnings only occasionally exceeded \$100 per worker per year and that even when products grown for home use and perquisites are added, total annual net income per worker seldom exceeds \$150. Few data are available concerning earnings of other farm laborers. In 1935-1936, however, in the only study available in which information was collected in a uniform manner in a number of areas at the same time, total gross earnings, including those of dependents, ranged from \$112 in a self-sufficing area in Tennessee to \$353 in a dairy area in Pennsylvania. Earnings from farm work alone ranged from \$69 to \$286 in the same area."

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"Comparable data relating to croppers and wage hands in Southern States indicate that in recent years net cash earnings only occasionally exceeded \$100 per worker per year and that even when products grown for home use and perquisites are added, total annual net income per worker seldom exceeds \$150. Few data are available concerning earnings of other farm laborers. In 1935-1936, however, in the only study available in which information was collected in a uniform manner in a number of areas at the same time, total gross earnings, including those of dependents, ranged from \$112 in a self-sufficing area in Tennessee to \$353 in a dairy area in Pennsylvania. Earnings from farm work alone ranged from \$69 to \$286 in the same area."

The situation of the migrant farm laborers does not differ from that of other agricultural workers, except that their difficulties are often seriously aggravated. This is particularly the case with housing, not only during the period of employment, but also during the period while migrants are on the road and during such time as migrants are waiting for employment or laying over between jobs. Under all three situations, water supply and sanitation are often sadly deplorable. Regulation is usually of the most casual sort. Constructive community interest in the problem is seldom displayed, despite the bearing of this matter upon community health. There is also a serious lack of facilities for education of migrant children. Migrants are peculiarly at a disadvantage with respect to receiving relief. The condition of migrants has been described in the recent Report on Migratory Labor, to the President, prepared by "The Interdepartmental Committee to Coordinate Health and Welfare Activities", as follows:

"The misfortunes of these migrant families are not confined to themselves alone. They create grave problems for every community into which they come. Nor are such communities confined to any one section. The industrial East, and the Middle States, as well as the West and Southwest, have their migrants. More than half of the 48 States are within the constant ebb and flow of these seasonal waves--some as recurrent users of migratory labor, others as constant sources of supply . . . a whole sector of this American people (migrants) stands exposed--not to one or a few, but to nearly all the social and economic hardships of our time--among them the exploitation of labor, unfavorable working conditions, makeshift housing, primitive sanitation, malnutrition and illness, lack of schools, and of health and welfare protection. For both the seasonal and migrant workers these conditions are equally bad and protection is equally urgent.

" . . . Uncertainty of work compels ceaseless moving on in the effort to piece together a series of short jobs. Travel between jobs averaged 516 miles according to a recent study in California: for more than one-fourth of these workers the average was above 1,000 miles.

"But the end of the journey does not always mean a job. Often the new arrivals find that too many have got there before him, or that a frost has killed the crop, or that a fall in price has destroyed with equal thoroughness the opportunity for work.

"Two and a half jobs per year; each job lasting about 8 weeks; median net earning \$110 in 1933 and \$124 in 1934--this was the average picture shown in the study of migratory labor made by the Works Progress Administration in those two years.

"In 1936 and 1937 median annual gross earnings of such workers ranged from \$154 to \$574, according to various states. These levels--with their irregular work and low earnings--represent those who are successful in finding the average amount of employment.

"Such families probably have the worst living conditions of any group in the United States . . . ordinarily their only possessions are a second-hand automobile, a tent, a few blankets, and cooking utensils. Their children have no chance for education, adequate medical care, or normal home and community life. Accumulating any reserve against the gaps between jobs or the risk of accident and illness is completely beyond their reach. Malnutrition and sickness are common among both adults and children. Though relatively free from chronic disease, and younger than the settled population, they suffer from about 74 per cent more disabling illnesses.

"For these hundreds of thousands of families; for every community to which their migration takes them, and for the entire Nation, these problems--of health, relief, housing, and education--compel an answer."

Such is the depressing picture of the hopelessness of ~~the~~ life of migratory workers.

In recent years the tendency toward increase in the number of migrants in agriculture has been aggravated not only by the shifts of population due to droughts and the displacement of farmers, but by the fact that unemployment in the cities has kept recent additions to the working population in rural areas, so that the supply of agricultural labor, both migratory and non-migratory, has been greatly augmented. But if the supply of farm wage labor increased, employment opportunities for them were

sharply reduced by farm depression, by mechanization, and by the back-to-the-farm movement of the city unemployed between 1930-1935 which almost doubled the number of unpaid family labor on the country's farms.

The total effect of all the factors I touched on upon farm wage labor has been catastrophic. Between 1929 and 1936 employment of hired labor on farms decreased by 20%. This decline in employment was at the same time accompanied by a drastic cut in farm wages, with the index of farm wages (1910-14 = 100) dropping from 170 in 1929 to 80 in 1933, while the total wages for the same period decreased from \$1,194,000,000 in 1929 to \$440,000,000 in 1933, rising to \$502,000,000 in 1935.

Recovery failed to relieve distress among agricultural wage earners. The index of farm wages dropped 53% between 1929 and 1933 and farm prices for the same period declined by an exact percentage. But while the index of farm prices, reflecting the effects of government policy increased by 54% between 1933 and 1935, and by 63% between 1935 and 1936, the index of farm wages, which as we have seen declined by 53% between 1929 and 1933, increased by only 24% between 1933 and 1935, and by 34% between 1935 and 1936. Again, the index of farm cash income declined by 51% between 1929 and 1933. The index of the total wage payments, including board declined by 63% for the same period. But while farm cash income increased by 38% between 1933 and 1935, wage payments improved by only 14%. The lag in wages continues to be present.

Equally significant was the fact that in the gigantic effort of the government to alleviate distress occasioned by the depression, farm wage labor and related groups were almost completely ignored. It would seem as though the public consciousness of the time suffered from a sort of blind spot when it came to detecting the distress of farm workers, and

from a complete paralysis of the will when it was a question of doing something for these unfortunate groups of our citizens. Among the billions of dollars that were destined to relieve farm distress, one could not find, even with the aid of a microscope a few millions for the relief of farm labor distress.

This indifference to the plight of agricultural wage farmers was due not so much to a lack of sentiment, of sympathy among those who mould public opinion or of those who shape public policies in agriculture, but more to the prevalence of that traditional conception which views agricultural wage-labor as an accidental, a purely transitory phase of apprenticeship toward farmer status. Today such conception of the agricultural ladder must be relegated to the realm of "fairy tales", but even fairy tales can do a lot of damage when taken seriously, and when one tries to fit his actions in accordance with illusions, even if these were not illusions at one time, one can but come to a sorry end--as was the case with Cervantes' illustrious knight Don Quixote, who tried to lead the life of a knight errant in an era when knight errantry was as dead as last year's cotton stalks.

It is only within the last few years that public recognition has been given to the problem of farm wage labor as one that is an integral part of the entire agricultural complex. In the 1937 agricultural Report to the President, former Secretary Henry A. Wallace for the first time in the history of the Department of Agriculture dealt seriously with this problem and had a full section devoted to it. Earlier, the Jones-Costigan Act of 1934 and the Sugar Act of 1937, as I mentioned previously, included provisions which empowered the Secretary of Agriculture to prescribe labor conditions as pre-requisite to the payment of benefits under

the Act. These provisions included the establishment of minimum age for children and minimum wages for beet workers employed in the beet fields.

The Department of Agriculture has also taken steps to pursue seriously a systematic study of this problem which was sadly neglected in the past. At the same time the work of the Farm Security Administration was greatly encouraged. The Rural Rehabilitation program, the tenant purchase program and resettlement, by enabling hundreds of thousands of families to retain their former status have acted to check the process of the transformation of these farmers into wage-earning status.

But most important of its activities with regard to farm labor has been the migratory camp program. In this connection, our first efforts were directed toward providing sanitary, health and housing facilities for migratory workers and to extend grants to those migrant workers in need who, because of state residence requirements, are not eligible for local relief.

Later, on the basis of experience and further exploration, the FSA realized that a more fundamental approach is necessary; that in order to improve conditions of migratory workers it is essential to reduce the flow of additional persons into the stream of migration, to arrest migration at its points of origin by introducing stabilizing elements to whatever points they are lacking, and wherever possible and justifiable from the standpoint of agricultural economy.

Surveys conducted by FSA in connection with migratory labor have indicated, among other things (1) that many farm-wage-earners are not homeless but join the migratory stream because their local cash earnings in the areas where they live most of the year is inadequate; and (2) that many migrants originate in non-commercial farm areas where the breaking down of subsistence farming is forcing farmers to seek employment as migratory workers.

To meet such and similar situations the FSA has developed several experimental approaches designed to stabilize resident farm wage-labor by providing better housing and garden lots to yield supplementary food or cash income, and to strengthen subsistence farm economy where it shows signs of disintegrating. The soundness of such programs has already been tested and, if extended on a scale commensurate to the need, should prove an important corrective.

Of equal significance is the growing realization of the need to extend and supplement the remedial measures developed thus far with measures designed to strengthen the economy of the working farmers, with measures directed toward the regularization of wage labor employment on farms by better planning of labor use and by extension and improvement of farm placement service; but, above all, by the extension of Social Security Act and of Fair Labor Standards Act to all wage earners in agriculture and of the National Labor Relations Act to the large-scale industrialized segments of agriculture.

The extremely low level of standards of living among agricultural wage workers have been noted too often to be reiterated here.^{1/} But the

1/ Farm wages usually equal 1/2 or 1/3 of industrial wages. Hours of work are mostly from sun-rise to sun-down.

implication of this fact to the general welfare of agriculture and to democracy is only now being gradually recognized.

The century long struggle of wage earners in industry for decent wages and better working conditions is finding expression among farm wage-workers in the industrialized sections of agriculture. These struggles express themselves in the efforts of wage-earners to organize for purposes of collective bargaining and to secure protective legislation enjoyed by other wage-earners.

Peculiarities of agricultural economy and of farm employment, its extreme seasonality, sets severe limitations to the ability of agricultural wage workers to organize and to secure better wages or better conditions. Nevertheless, the phenomenal wave of agricultural strikes in 1933 and 1934, which embraced practically all important areas of commercialized farming in the United States and which in magnitude and intensity rivaled the big industrial conflicts, demonstrates the essential instability of employer-employee relationships in industrialized agriculture.

Labor instability in agriculture as in industry grows out of the failure to recognize three fundamental desires of the worker: the desire for security; for sufficient purchasing power, and for a voice in the determination of the conditions under which an individual shall live and work. All three are essential to self-respect and human dignity. All three have become recognized objectives of democracy. And in the past all three have been singularly denied to agricultural wage-earners.

The right to security in old age and during periods of unemployment embodied in the Social Security Act has yet to be recognized for farm wage-earners; the right to sufficient purchasing power to provide a bare subsistence standard of living, recognized in the Fair Labor Standards Act, does not apply to agricultural wage-earners. The legal right of wage-earners to organize and to bargain collectively--now the declared public policy of the United States is still denied farm wage-workers even in areas of highly industrialized agriculture.

The growing recognition of the need of extending security and protective legislation to agricultural workers is indicated by the recommendations made by public bodies along those lines in recent months.

Thus, the Interstate Conference on Migratory Labor, which was held at Atlanta, Georgia, on December 17 and 18 of last year (1940) which was sponsored by Labor Commissioners of five states--Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina--and which brought together about 200 representatives of the State Departments of Labor, Education, Health, Public Welfare and Agriculture; representatives of federal agencies, of labor, farm and civic organization--made in part the following recommendations:

1. That there should be federal licensing of all private employment agencies, agencies and labor contractors operating across state lines, as well as regulation of interstate job advertising, for the purpose of preventing fraudulent misrepresentation of job opportunities, exorbitant fees and all other illicit and speculative traffic in human labor.

2. That the coverage of labor and social security laws, both state and federal, be extended to all workers now excluded, including workers in industrial agriculture, and in processing and packing of agricultural products. Specifically, this means giving these workers the needed protection of such laws as workmen's compensation, child labor, wage and hour laws, wage payments and wage collection laws, the Fair Labor Standards Act, legislation for collective bargaining, unemployment compensation, old age and survivors insurance.

Earlier the report to the President on migratory labor prepared by the Inter-departmental Committee to Coordinate Health and Welfare Activities, made several recommendations among which were the following:

1. The chronic insecurity and poverty of migrant workers too often subject them to denials of their civil liberties. Their less unfortunate fellow citizens can protect themselves against such abuses, but these groups are peculiarly defenseless. Particular attention should be directed toward insuring them the civil rights to which all citizens are entitled.
2. Legislation should be passed empowering the federal government to regulate interstate labor contract.
3. Migratory workers should continue to have the protection of the Fair Labor Standards Act wherever it is now applicable to them. If any changes in this law are considered, they should be in the direction of extending--rather than contracting its coverage.

4. The protection of the Social Security programs should be extended to migratory workers, in public assistance, by uniform and less restrictive standards of state residence; in the insurance programs—old age and survivors insurance and unemployment compensation—by extension of coverage to agricultural wage earners.

Needless to say, these recommendations as those of the Atlanta Conference, not only approved the FSA migratory camp program, but recommended their extension.

The application of these principles of social legislation to agriculture are admittedly difficult, but their extension is nonetheless essential to the social-economic welfare of agricultural economy, and if acted upon, would contribute, by adding to the stability of agriculture, to the welfare of the worker and the farm operator alike.

